

Martin, S. E. and Copeland, D. A. (Ed.). (2003), *The function of newspapers in society. A global perspective*. Westport, CT: Praeger. ISBN 0-275-97398-0 (179 pp.)

Obviously, newspapers and their readers have to be categorized as endangered species. According to the National Newspaper Association, “the year 2078, at the latest, would see the end of daily newspaper reading in the United States”. Four years after its forecast, it seems a rather optimistic view. According to a recent documentary, *Epic 2014*, produced by the fictional Museum of Media History (in reality, the American journalists Matt Thompson and Robin Sloan) the press as we know will no longer exist within the next ten years. Traditional reporting will collapse. In the year 2014, news is churned out by the media giant Googlezon, and consists of blogs, attitudes, discoveries, preferences, claims, and random thoughts, gathered and shaped by computers and human editors, and fed back to ordinary people. The *New York Times* has become a newsletter read only by the elite and the elderly.

“It is no wonder that many inside and outside the newspaper industry speculate about the demise of newspapers”, Shannon E. Martin writes in her concluding chapter of *The function of newspapers in society*. Some practitioners believe that the loss of paper copies and the time required for newsprint publication infuse a shallowness in the news product when it is delivered only to a cyber reader clicking from link to link. There are concerns, too, about partnering with broadcast affiliates. Cross-over news bulletins from reporters who work at a print news desk but who also tell the story more immediately to broadcast viewers and online visitors will not value the same quality. Nonetheless, Martin, who is a member of the faculty at the University of Maine, concludes: “Newspapers have a longheld place in societies around the world. But how that history helps us prepare for, shape, or predict the future is still not clear”.

She brings to memory one of the earliest prophets of the newspaper industry’s downfall, James Gordon Bennett, founder and editor of the *New York Herald*. In 1850 he declared that newspapers would not survive the overwhelming success of the telegraph. They did. Afterwards, they survived radio and television – but will there be a paper life after internet? “The claim that daily newspapers are dead is a tired old story”, Gary F. Sherlock, then a Gannett publisher, believed in 1997.

“For newspapers the twentieth century was a story of missed opportunities and the slow erosion of a reading public”, Agnes Hooper Gottlieb, professor of communication at Seton Hall University, ascertains in her

contribution to this volume. However, the story of newspapers around the world does not end with the twentieth century, is her conclusion. "There is more to unfold and much more to be written". This sounds encouraging, but undoubtedly she is familiar with the expression 'stick with ink and sink!'

*The function of newspapers in society* offers a more or less global perspective on newspapers, historically as well as geographically. It gives the reader an opportunity to look across cultural uses of newspapers. All contributions are written by American authors who, not surprising, pay much attention to their domestic newspaper history. The editors give no clear justification why they preferred in their global perspective, for instance, Kuwait and Fiji to Eastern Europe and Russia.

Newspapers have played a crucial role in the development of many cultures. In Arab cultures, for example, newspapers were used by colonial powers to distribute the government agenda. But when local writers and publishers were in control of the newspapers, they became vehicles for national identity-building. In China, Japan, and Korea newspapers were so important to the development of these countries that their leaders felt it essential to exert full control over what was said and who was allowed to say it. Africa's newspapers have proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of an array of economic constraints and hostile regimes, W. Joseph Campbell concludes. Despite the many hazards facing journalists and their newspapers in many places, Africa now has more daily newspapers than ever.

In Western countries, the loss of newspaper functions is beyond dispute. As there has been a decline in the public acceptance of institutions and authority, there has been a decline in the power of journalists to shape the public agenda, in the words of Donald L. Shaw and Charles McKenzie (professor, respectively fellow, at the University of North Carolina). They pay attention to the function of newspapers as intermediates between audiences and their local communities. Audiences who are committed to newspapers, even use them as a surrogate for the community. According to Shaw and McKenzie this is likely to remain so in the twenty-first century. "If newspapers do not survive, it will be because some other medium serves that vital community agenda function".

This touches the sore spot. Virtual and transitory communities seem to take over local communities. Booming commuter towns in The Netherlands such as Almere and Zoetermeer can hardly be regarded as local communities, due to a lack of community activities and local orientation among their residents. Local newspapers are no longer able to take a deep root in these and other suburbs.

It's the other side of a symbiotic relationship. Not only, no newspaper, no community, but also, no longer a community – goodbye newspaper. Or is this just another tired old story?

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Hine, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Virtual methods; Issues in social research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. ISBN: 1-84520-085-3. (242 pp.)

A new and important anthology on Internet research has just been released (May 2005). This book, *Virtual methods; Issues in social research on the Internet*, can rightfully be considered a successor to the now classic *Doing Internet research*, compiled by Steve Jones some six years ago. *Virtual methods* conveys the intimacy and excitement only possible when the researchers who conducted the studies are also the authors of the methodological reflection. With this basis, the book represents a contribution to the genre of scholarly writing sometimes referred to as 'tales from the field'.

*Virtual methods* emerged from a series of six seminars held over a three-year period, 2001–2003. Twelve of the chapters in the book are revisions of presentations at those seminars, and these constitute the main body of *Virtual methods*. This material is divided into two sections – 'Research Relationships and Online Relationships', and 'Research Sites and Strategies' – each of which has a short integrative introduction. The first chapter, prepared by the editor of the volume, Christine Hine, provides an overarching methodological framework, discussed below. A concluding epilogue continues some of the themes presented in that framework and makes suggestions for an ongoing methodology-oriented research agenda.

Hine's introductory chapter places the chapter themes within a framework termed the 'Sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge' (SDSSK), which is a complicated way of indicating the importance of reflexivity in Internet research. An important aspect of such reflexivity, which Hine elaborates, is the historical dimension of the enterprise. The first wave of Internet research, through the 1980s and early 1990s, is dominated by psychological concerns (e.g., social context cues, aggression, and addiction) and reliance on experimental methods. The second wave is characterized by the importance of cultural context and employment of naturalistic methods including participant observation. These are, of course, rough indicators of methodological emphasis at different